



## **butterflies in your (aching) ribcage by everybreatheeverymove**

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**Summary:** (Prompt: Softness and stomachache.) "I came to see you." El explains, "To maybe sleepover, like last week? But..." It's almost an ache; tightening around her organs and replacing her lungs with butterflies, shaky and nervous and fluttering against her insides. Mike smiles, "We can do that."

## butterflies in your (aching) ribcage

It's not the first time she's done this. Snuck out sometime after dinner, told Will where she was going and made him promise not to say a word. He agrees, usually.

She left Hop a note, *"Be back in the morning. Gone to Max's for the night,"* and proceeded to let Max in on her plan. She'd gone along with it without asking too many questions.

Max had just told her that Mike was meant to be spending the day with Lucas, so the other boy would likely still be there whenever El showed up.

So she'd been prepared, technically. But what she hadn't planned for was for the basement to be encased in pitch blackness aside from the glare of the television, and the sound of two teenage boys (loudly) snoring being the only noises to fill the air.

The Atari is still plugged in, and there's a whole stack of video games sat beside it. Cans of regular Coke line the old coffee table in front of the sofa, and there's a half-eaten KitKat bar right beside Lucas' head, along with an empty Pizza Hut box by the foot of the sofa.

Lucas is spread out over a sleeping bag, one leg hitched up as though he'd fallen asleep mid-stretch. Mike is no better; one arm over the back of the sofa and the other dangling along the floor, knuckles scraping the thin carpet.

Taking a moment to reconsider her options, El quietly shuts the door behind her. It'd been left open for some reason. She locks it shut before taking a step into the room, awkwardly chewing at her bottom lip and reconsidering her options.

(Maybe it's not too late to just go to Max's after all.)

"El?"

Her gaze drifts over to her boyfriend then, finding him staring back at her. His back is bent as he pushes up on his hands, forcing himself

onto his knees slowly. He presses into the sofa to give himself momentum to haul himself up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes after a moment as he takes her in, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you." El explains, "To maybe sleepover, like last week? But..."

"Oh, no, no," Mike quickly stammers out, and he's flying up and off the cushions within seconds. His hands flap about in front of him, and he takes long strides over to her, bare feet padding along the cold carpet. "We can still do that," he offers with a smile, teeth-baring and wide. He reaches up to cup the sides of her face then, palms flat against her cheeks as he presses a soft, small kiss to her lips before she can stop him, "Okay?"

The girl frowns, glancing around the room as if she's unsure, "We can?" A breath, "What about...him?" She asks with a slight grin, pointing a finger down at Lucas." El looks back up at Mike, watching as his expression shifts from amusement to endearment.

"Just, you know, stay quiet." Mike holds a finger up to his lips, one hand still caressing the side of her face, "Lucas is out cold." He lowers his hand to his throat, scratching the hollow between his collarbones as he asks, "Can you grab that cushion?"

He waves his left hand about then, pointing toward a stack of cushions lined up by the back door. There's a large, puffy blue one sitting on top of the pile, and El figures that's the one he's referring to.

She nods, moving to brush her hair behind her ears, "Sure."

The girl makes her way over to the door, taking a second to contemplate shutting the blind. It's half-open, so anybody could easily look in and see them all sleeping—including Hop if he suspected her lie. El throws Mike a quick look over her shoulder, pulling the blind to a close and reaching for the cushion as she keeps her eyes on him.

He's rearranging the sofa cushions—picking up an old one that El *knows* smells of cinnamon for some reason, and repeatedly placing it

back down again, just on a slightly different angle—one hand aimlessly rubbing at the nape of his neck as though he's nervous about something.

"Mike?" El walks toward him, gripping the thick cushion tightly between her fingers as she kicks off her shoes, letting them slide under the table beside the sofa.

The boy perks up, standing straight and hands dropping to his sides. "Yeah?" He moves one hand up to his hip, lips parting in concern, "what is it?"

"Can I," El starts, but she loses her train of thought almost immediately. She's not ignorant of the way his pajama pants are too baggy for his waist, long enough to stretch over his legs but not nearly tight enough to cover the sliver of pale skin visible between his t-shirt and bottoms.

Feeling the heat rise to her cheeks, and an almost uncomfortable but oddly satisfying sensation settles in her belly, El bites at the inside of her right cheek, lips pursing as if she's considering something.

Mike is still standing there though, only he's several steps closer and he's reaching one hand out for her arm, "El?" He raises both eyebrows, a mix of confusion and concern clear on his face.

"Can I borrow some pajamas?" She asks suddenly, letting out a sigh as soon as the words have fallen from her lips. It's like she'd been holding the question in forever.

"Yeah," Mike nods, and he retracts his hand now, mid-air. "I'll go steal a pair of Nancy's." He tells her with a grin, preparing to spin around and whip up the stairs in search of his sister.

But El grabs his arm before he can, fingers softly curling around the skin of his wrist, "No." She holds his gaze for a moment, voice dipping as she says, "Yours."

"Oh," is all he says, can say. Then he adds, "Erm, sure." He nods, almost eagerly now, black hair moving up and down, "Just gimme a sec." Mike tells her, holding up one finger in her face.

He sprints up the stairs after that—a light jog, really—and El is left standing in the basement with nothing but the static of the television and Lucas' soft snoring to keep her company.

Sitting down on the sofa, El folds her legs up beneath her on the seat. She drops her hands to her lap, twiddling her thumbs as she glances around the room.

No matter how much time goes by or how long she spends here, she thinks it will always feel like this. Like a second home; the kind that can almost feel more familiar, more welcoming than her actual house sometimes. She thinks it's because the Wheeler's basement was the first place she ever felt truly safe and unafraid. She could breathe here. She could just lie under a creaky old table or crash on the couch with her friends and just *be*; she can't do that at home. At least, not in the same way.

There are rules at home, and Joyce and Hop like it when she keeps her room in order. They like it when the living room is tidy, and her bedroom is clean. Hop's gotten a lot less slack now that both families are living together, and El knows it's for the better but...still.

(Joyce says it's important that she keeps order in her life. And a routine. It's good for her mental health.)

(El can't argue with her on that.)

And while Karen Wheeler is organized and methodical—maybe even to a fault sometimes—she also lets her son run havoc in the family basement and El is eternally grateful to her for it. If she didn't let Mike have this space, didn't let the Party converge here whenever they felt like it and come and go as they pleased, El isn't too sure they would have any other place to pass the time.

It's like a second home to her now; a second skin. She gets the warm and fuzzies—Max taught her that expression once and she loves it—whenever she approaches the basement door. She gets all tingly whenever she pushes it open to find Mike sat on the sofa, either reading a book or playing a video game with the boys.

Tonight though, when she had knocked and nobody had answered,

when she'd turned the door handle to find it unlocked and her boyfriend was just sprawled out on the couch with a leg hanging over the edge, that had done something different to her.

(Maybe it's because Lucas had been there too, she thinks. Lucas was there so she'd known that she couldn't just kiss Mike awake or snuggle into his side and explain everything in the morning. How she got there, why she came...)

(Or maybe it's because that door being unlocked had set off a whole bunch of alarms in her head and, for the three seconds it took to open the door and find him there—asleep, a mess—she'd been worried sick. And worry wasn't something she took lightly.)

(Worry creeps up on you like a virus and settles into your bones like poison. Worry keeps you up at night, in panic and anguish, making you toss and turn until you're sweating and breathing funny and you can no longer think straight. It makes your clothes stick to your skin and your hands feel clammy.)

(Now all she wants is to hug him and make sure he's okay.)

All she wants is to drown out the sound of the television static with Mike's deep, warm breath against her neck, sending waves of goosebumps along her skin. All she wants is to lie down and think of nothing but the two arms that'll surely wrap around her tight and send her off into a slumber.

All she wants is to understand the strange, but not entirely unwelcome, feeling in her stomach. It's almost an ache; tightening around her organs and replacing her lungs with butterflies, shaky and nervous and fluttering against her insides.

She thinks she'd like to understand it better, to ask Mike if he's ever felt like this. Like he can't breathe, can't stop the gradual heat pooling in his stomach and the oddly comfortable sensation of being suffocating from the inside-out.

(But she can't do that with Lucas here. Some other time, maybe.)

"Okay," Mike jumps down the final step, a pair of what looks to be

plaid pajamas in his right hand. They're red and white and blue, and El wonders if he got them over the holidays. "These should fit you." He extends the clothes out to El, waiting for her to take them.

For a second, she flashes back to the time they were twelve. She'd been cold and wet, and Mike warm and welcoming. They were smaller then, younger. Things were so much simpler.

Strange as it is, she thinks being a fugitive was a lot easier for her to manage than being a teenage girl with urges and feelings. Things were easier before she knew him properly—before he helped her or she saved him or he kissed her and she kissed him back.

But love isn't easy, and it shouldn't be a walk in the park. Hop told her that once—when she'd confessed to telling Mike that she loved him and wanted her dad to know that it was *true*. He'd said it wouldn't be easy; to love someone and have them love you back. It took work, and communication, and most of all patience. He said they would have to figure things out as they went along, that it was something that happened over time and not just in a heartbeat.

She realizes now that he'd been right the whole time, maybe even more than he knew. Her relationship with Mike had always been like that—a burn from understanding to devotion, affection to love. They've been helping each other along the whole time. And if that meant things would never be easy, well then El isn't sure she ever wants them to be.

"El?" Mike rasps, blinks, and she almost jumps right out of her skin, standing from the sofa on wobbly legs.

She takes the folded pajamas from his hand, holding them up close to her chest with a smile. "Be back in a second." El gnaws at her bottom lip then, rounding the boy with slow steps.

Mike watches as she artfully steps around Lucas' slumped-over body, almost squeaking when her toes graze his kneecap. The boy on the floor doesn't make a noise, doesn't move. But he seems to gasp, almost like he's just woken up from a deep slumber.

El's eyes widen, and she looks over at Mike with a panicked look on

her face, silently asking him if Lucas is still asleep as she sidesteps again.

Lucas lets out a loud snore at that, his arms moving ever so slightly under his pillow.

"It's cool," Mike says, nodding as his shoulders rise and fall in a shrug, "if he wakes up, I'll just send him home." He tells her, a smirk plastered across his face when El giggles, "plus, then we can use his pillow."

"I heard that."

The pair's eyes drop to the tall teen passed out on the floor, surprise taking over El's face as she backs up toward the bathroom, and Mike's face contorting in bewilderment, "Dude, you're awake?" He squawks, "What the hell?"

"Been awake for like ten minutes but thanks for noticing," Lucas mumbles, rolling over to lie on his back. He kicks his legs out, knocking over a crushed empty soda can just as a yawn slips out of his mouth. "And you're not having my pillow. Find your own."

Mike snarls down at him, but his eyes flick up to catch the bathroom door shutting, "You're in my house. If I want the pillow, I'll take the damn pillow." He tells him, edging close to press his big toe against Lucas's nose and earning a shriek in response.

Lucas squeezes his eyes shut tight, leaning up and smacking the other boy's foot away with his hand, repeatedly swatting the air. "Man, what the fuck?" Lucas yelps when he feels the pillow dragged out from under his head, and he blindly reaches out for it as though he can get it back.

"Told you." Mike places the pillow down on the sofa, right up against the side and in front of a couple of others. He picks up the old blue cushion then, tossing it onto the floor beside Lucas' head, "You can have that one."

Lucas scowls, readjusting his t-shirt before he picks up the cushion. "I don't want this one," he says, running his nails over the hard texture

of the case and lifting it up to his face, nostrils flaring as his brows raise in disgust, "Man, this one sticks!"

"Yeah, Holly got cinnamon powder all over it last week," Mike informs him. "Forgot to wash it."

Lucas mutters something below his breath but he fluffs up the cushion anyway, patting both sides of it, "You're disgusting."

"If I'm disgusting then go home," Mike argues.

"Why would I do that when I can just stay here?"

"Erm, I don't know, maybe because you live like twenty feet away."

"It's the middle of the night!"

"It's nine-thirty!"

Lucas rolls his eyes, and he plops down onto the cushion with a thump, the back of his head pressing into the quilted pillow, "You just want me to go so you can make out with your girlfriend." He stretches his arms back over his head, a pleased look on his face, "Not falling for it."

"If we were gonna do that, we'd just go upstairs." Mike reasons, his breath catching when Lucas sends him a shit-eating grin. "Not like *that*."

"Not like what?" comes a soft voice from a few feet away, El stood in the doorway to the bathroom with her old clothes in her hands.

"Nothing." Mike clarifies as El places the stack of clothing down on the table by the door and approaches him, "nothing important. Lucas is just being an ass." He explains, color rising to his cheeks.

On the floor, Lucas snickers, "If Lucas hears spit, Lucas is going home."

"Lucas is free to go home."

"Maybe Lucas doesn't want to just yet."

"Well, maybe Lucas should-"

El clears her throat, eyes downcast. She kicks the empty Sprite can away from her feet, pulling a face, "Can we just...sleep?"

"Yeah!" Mike nods, "I want to." He holds a hand up to his chest then, index finger outstretched to it points up to his face, "Like, *I* am trying to make this all nice for you but he," a glance down at his friend, and then, "keeps talking."

"Man, just spoon El and shut up already."

"Spoon?"

"Yeah, El." Lucas flicks one eye open to look at her, "*Spoon*. I think Mike is a little spoon." He tells her in a whisper, nodding to himself. Then his eyes close, and he settles back into his open sleeping bag.

El just looks confused, "What does that *mean*?"

"Ignore him." Mike waves a hand in front of him, reaching for hers. He tugs on her wrist gently, ushering her forward as he grits his teeth, "And I am *not* a little spoon." He warns Lucas, pulling the blanket off of the couch and waiting for El to sit.

"Then why are you getting so defensive, huh?"

"Because I'm just *not*."

Lucas just groans, "Dude, have you ever even spooned anyone?" He sighs, "And your mom when you were a kid doesn't count."

"Well, no." Mike mumbles, and his cheeks drain of all color, "but that doesn't-"

"That's exactly what it means." Lucas tells him, "Good night, little spoon."

"Fuck you."

"Whatever, little spoon."

"Lucas."

"Mike?"

He turns to face El, seeing her sat upright with her back pressed against the sofa cushions. She pats the spot in front of her, clearly gesturing for Mike to lie down, too.

His face flushes, though she's pretty sure he isn't aware of it, and he moves to settle in beside her less than ten seconds later. Long limbs stretched out and tangling together, an arm wrapped over hers where she's cradling his body, his breath against her neck just as she wanted.

(There's something warm about the feel of his fingers intertwining with her own, something comforting and calm about his hair tickling the gentle skin of her throat whenever she breathes in, dark curls a sharp contrast against the creamy skin of her neck where she's left a couple of buttons undone. There's something altogether dreamy about the way he draws her closer, mumbling something in her ear she can't quite make out but appreciates nonetheless.)

Silence falls over the room, for all of maybe five seconds, and then Lucas decides to break it, "You tucked in nicely there, Michael?"